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Rising Tide of Islamic Militants See Iraq as Ultimate Battlefield

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

SULAIMANIYA, Iraq, Aug. 11 — In much the same way as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan stirred an earlier generation of young Muslims determined to fight the infidel, the American presence in Iraq is prompting a rising tide of Muslim militants to slip into the country to fight the foreign occupier, Iraqi officials and others say.

"Iraq is the nexus where many issues are coming together — Islam versus democracy, the West versus the axis of evil, Arab nationalism versus some different types of political culture," said Barham Saleh, the prime minister of this Kurdish-controlled part of northern Iraq. "If the Americans succeed here, this will be a monumental blow to everything the terrorists stand for."

Recent intelligence suggests the militants are well organized. One returning group of fighters from the militant Ansar al-Islam organization captured in the Kurdish region two weeks ago consisted of five Iraqis, a Palestinian and a Tunisian.

Among their possessions were five forged Italian passports for a different group of militants they were apparently supposed to join, said Dana Ahmed Majid, the director of general security for the region.

Long gone are the bearded men in the short robes believed worn by the Prophet Muhammad that the Arabs who went to Afghanistan favored. Instead, the same practices that allowed the Sept. 11 attackers to blend into American society are evident.

The fighters steal over Iraq's largely unpoliced borders in small groups with instructions to go to a safe house where they can whisper a password to gain admittance and then lie low awaiting further instructions, say Iraqi security officials in northern Iraq and in Baghdad.

"They come across as civilians, they shave their beards and have clean-cut hair," said a senior security official in the Kurdish region.

Iraqi officials say they expect a broad spectrum of Muslim militants to flood Iraq. They believe that Ansar al-Islam, a small fundamentalist group believed to have links with Al Qaeda, forms the backbone of the underground network. The group was forced out of northern Iraq by a huge attack during the war.

Mullah Mustapha Kreikar, the founding spiritual leader of Ansar al-Islam, said in an interview on Sunday with LBC, the Lebanese satellite channel, that the fight in Iraq would be the culmination of all Muslim efforts since the Islamic caliphate collapsed in the early 20th century with the demise of the Ottoman Empire. "There is no difference between this occupation and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979," he said from Norway, where he has political asylum.

"The resistance is not only a reaction to the American invasion, it is part of the continuous Islamic

struggle since the collapse of the caliphate," he said. "All Islamic struggles since then are part of one organized effort to bring back the caliphate."

Such appeals appear to be attracting a wide range of militants. The fight against Al Qaeda and its numerous offshoots worldwide during the last two years has severely disrupted their coordination, but details emerging from either suspects captured in the last few weeks or from recent surveillance indicates that Qaeda training methods in everything from forgery to establishing sleeper cells are being applied here.

Al Qaeda Web sites carry long treatises on the need for jihad, or holy war, and argue that the effort should not be dissipated in meaningless activities like peaceful demonstrations. Chat-room discussions occasionally focus on how to sneak across borders.

Once established in Baghdad or in the Sunni triangle north of the capital, where much of the armed resistance occurs, the Islamic militants often make common cause with members of the former Baathist government who are also determined to fight Americans.

At least one Saudi and one Egyptian formerly linked to Al Qaeda helped establish an initial training camp three weeks ago where new recruits are lectured on the theological underpinnings of jihad, a security official in Baghdad said.

"All previous experiences with the activities of the underground organizations proved that they flourish in countries with a chaotic security situation, unchecked borders and the lack of a central government — Iraq is all that," said Muhammad Salah, an expert on militant groups and the Cairo bureau chief of the newspaper Al Hayat. "It is the perfect environment for fundamentalist groups to operate and grow."

United States troops have arrested two clerics from Islamic Kurdish groups — once all part of one big organization — suspected of providing logistics help to Ansar fighters, Iraqi officials said. More than 150 members of Ansar al-Islam are believed to have slipped into the country in recent weeks, said a security official in the Kurdish region. Smugglers are believed to be bringing them over daily.

In addition, there are an estimated 100,000 former members of the Iraqi security services without gainful employment, all concentrated in the Sunni triangle north of Baghdad. Perhaps 2,000 of them, especially those with no source of income and no hopes of gaining any kind of amnesty, would be likely recruits for the fundamentalists, the official said.

Although attacks like the deadly car bombing outside the Jordanian Embassy that killed 17 people last Thursday are most likely the work of militants, security officials say, some attacks are carried out either for money or by Iraqis who just do not want Americans here. But the officials anticipate that militant organizations will carry out more attacks.

The training around Baghdad so far has been in three stages, a security official said. Some sort of initial contact is made — usually after prayers in a mosque — and then a second meeting is arranged. Some recruits are weeded out then, but the third round of likely candidates are the ones who make it to the training camp, the official said. They are told to move away from their families and not communicate with anyone.

Some candidates are believed to be the men who worked for Muhammad Khtair al-Dulaimi in the Special Operations Directorate, the branch of the Iraqi secret service that specialized in remote control bombings, poisoning and other operations. The former chief is still at large and is suspected of putting

his employees to work against the Americans, the source said.

But the main group organizing an underground route of safe houses and coordinating the various efforts is believed to be Ansar al-Islam, or the Islamic Partisans in English, whose suspected ties to Al Qaeda were among the reasons the Bush administration used to justify the war against Iraq. Although initially a strictly Kurdish organization, its ranks swelled with Arab fighters after the United States attacked Afghanistan in October 2001.

Before the Iraqi war the group was believed to have some 850 members, but up to 200 were killed in the attack against them by Kurdish and United States Special Forces troops in March. Several hundred more were either captured or turned themselves in, leaving an estimated 300 to 350 who fled to Iran.

The extent of their activities remains cloudy. But Web sites believed linked to Al Qaeda are clear enough about the envisaged fight: "The struggle with America has to be carefully managed, the 'electric shock method' must be applied, relentless shocks that haunt the Americans all the time everywhere, without giving them a break to regain balance or power."

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